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Rochester in Retrospect

A History of Rochester to 1961

Excerpted from an article by former City Historian Blake McKelvey
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Nathaniel Rochester

The site of Rochester has, from the beginning, been linked with the future rather than with the past. Ebenezer Allan, its unsuccessful promoter of 1789, quickly discovered that his crude mill on the west bank of the Genesee River at the small upper falls would not conveniently serve the Seneca tribesmen scattered sparsely throughout western New York. Few of them had any reason other than curiosity to journey 50 or 100 miles through the forest to visit Allan's mill. Even the pioneer settlers who had begun to push into the upper Genesee valley had little interest in such an out-of-the-way location. They planted their villages – Geneva, Canandaigua, Bath, and Dansville, among others – on the water routes to the east or to the south. Allan soon abandoned his backwoods post, leaving the Genesee falls site to await the arrival of a man who could grasp its future potentialities.

Colonel Nathaniel Rochester was such a man. Journeying by horseback up the Susquehanna valley from Hagerstown, Maryland, on several land-hunting expeditions in the early 1800s, he first visited the Genesee falls in 1803. With two companions he purchased Allan's hundred-acre tract as a prospective town site. Colonel Rochester moved his family in 1810 to Dansville where they could enjoy the facilities of an established town while he supervised the development of his other properties down the valley.

Spurred by the Embargo and Nonintercourse acts, which prohibited shipments to the Continent, a new trade was

developing down the Genesee. Since most pioneers, with scheduled payments due on their land, were eager to ship out potash, staves, or grain, the Genesee route to the north offered a promising new outlet. Obviously a milltown at the upper falls, where the flatboats had to be unloaded and the rafts broken up, would serve this trade and prosper with it.

The Pioneer Village

When Colonel Rochester returned in 1811 to survey the tract that would eventually bear his name, a bridge was already under construction to carry a projected road from Pittsford across the river at the center of his tract. He hastened to plot its extension westward as Buffalo Street (present-day Main Street), toward which it was headed, and laid out a second broad street, running north and south and crossing the former at a main four corners a short distance from the bridge. Following the prevailing gridiron pattern, he laid out several additional streets, crossing the major thoroughfares at right angles. Setting aside a one-acre plot a half block west of the Four Corners for a future court house, he engaged Enos Stone, a recently arrived pioneer on the east bank of the river, as his agent and directed him to sell quarter-acre lots at \$30 to \$50 each, depending on the location, to any settlers who would agree to build on them within a year.

A dozen buyers appeared that first season, among them Hamlet Scrantom from Connecticut. The Scrantom family, the first to arrive the next spring, thus became Rochester's first





permanent residents. They occupied a log cabin that summer on the site of the present Powers Block, while Hamlet pressed the construction of his own frame house and helped Abelard Reynolds and other early settlers erect similar structures nearby.

War of 1812

News of the outbreak of the War of 1812 reached the Genesee in June, halting trade with Canada. Farmers up the valley continued, however, to send produce down the river to provision the militia forces that soon gathered to protect the frontier. New settlers from the east were less numerous, but the millsite's location ten miles up from the river's mouth made it attractive to a number of pioneers who were abandoning the more exposed points along the lake.

"The village is flourishing beyond all calculation," Hamlet Scrantom wrote to his brother in December 1813.

Among those who had erected houses, one was Jehiel Barnard, a tailor, another, James B. Carter, a blacksmith, while Abelard Reynolds, the first to complete a frame house, served both as postmaster and tavern keeper. Scrantom, a miller by trade, took charge at first of Stone's crude sawmill across the river, but hastily transferred his services to Francis Brown when that promoter of the 20-acre tract at the main falls erected his larger mill there the next year. The first lawyer, the first doctor, and the first itinerant preacher arrived, and Miss Huldah Strong, sister of Mrs. Reynolds, gathered the younger children together for the first school held in the loft over Barnard's tailor shop. The next year brought the erection of a red mill, several additional houses, and a district school.

The Village of Rochesterville

By the return of peace in 1815, the falls settlement that would become Rochester had 331 residents. Several of them hastened to organize a Presbyterian Church and joined others in erecting a frame structure on stilts to accommodate varied religious services. Rival promoters were laying out town plots across the river and further north at the main falls and also at the lower falls.

Colonel Rochester, however, had increasing confidence in the potentialities of the falls site. With five sawmills and three gristmills competing along the Genesee falls in 1816 for the lumber and grain brought down the river or hauled in by ox cart from nearby settlements, the prospects seemed bright. Some 12,000 were already resident in the towns that would later become Monroe County, and Rochester, with perhaps 600 inhabitants, got its first weekly newspaper and its first resident pastor that year.

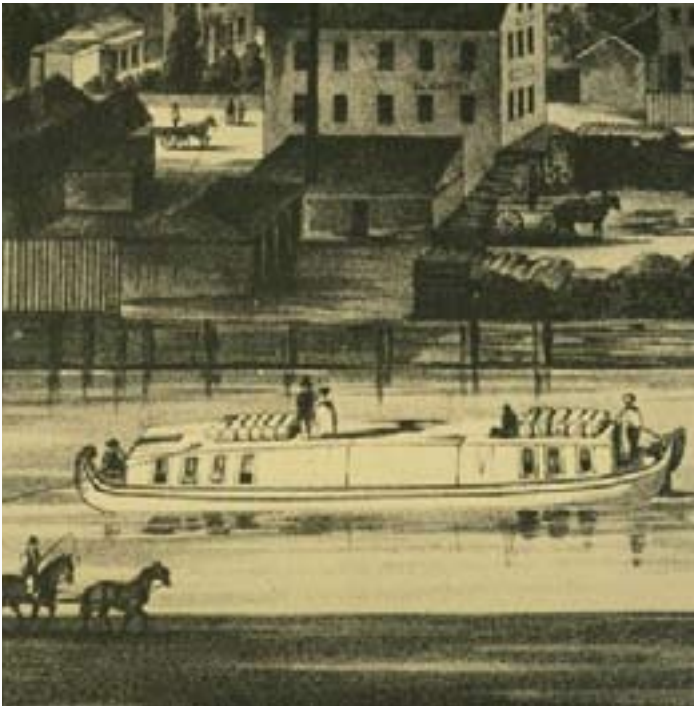


A resurgence of settlement and trade following the war prompted the residents of the lower Genesee townships to petition Albany for the establishment of a new county. Although temporarily repulsed in that effort, Colonel Rochester took the lead in a successful bid in 1817 for a village charter.

Incorporated in an act passed on March 21, Rochesterville encompassed 655 acres on the west bank, including Colonel Rochester's 100-acre tract, 200 acres previously known as Frankfort, and room to expand north, west, and south. Located as it was in Genesee County, it could not span the river to include the eastside settlements, which lay in Ontario County. When, however, the rapid growth of the lower Genesee townships finally prompted the legislature to reorganize them in 1821 as Monroe County, with its seat at Rochester, that village soon straddled the river and, by annexing the eastside settlements, increased its area to 1,239 acres and its population to 2,700.

The Erie Canal

A much more significant development had meanwhile transformed Rochester into America's first boom town. Talk of digging a canal across the state had been recurrent for two decades before a favorable decision was reached in April 1817. Since the canal, if built, would have to cross the Genesee between the small upper falls and the main falls, Rochester was assured full benefit. Yet no one suspected how great its impact would be.



Even Colonel Nathaniel Rochester, who determined at this point to move his family to the village, miscalculated the canal's influence. Still envisioning a rustic village, he purchased a house erected by Dr. Levi Ward overlooking the river and the proposed canal a short distance from the Four Corners. He hastily set out a pear orchard in back of the house, but before the young seedlings could blossom, they had to be uprooted to make way for a canal basin.

Interest quickened as construction of the canal commenced in the east on July 4, 1817. Many serious doubts concerning its practicality remained, but the successful completion of the first section through Utica in 1820 restored confidence. Work started the next year on the great embankment over the Irondequoit valley east of Rochester, and a contract was let that fall for an aqueduct over the Genesee River.

America's First Boom Town

Rochester, of course, was throbbing with excitement over the construction of the Erie Canal. Its builders erected a half dozen new mills, numerous stores and shops, several taverns, and two stone churches overlooking the public square where the first court house was nearing completion. To finance these and other operations, a bank was needed, and after much bitter contention with jealous banking interests in Canandaigua and between rival local factions, Colonel Rochester secured a charter and successfully organized and opened the first bank of Rochester in the summer of 1824. The completion of the aqueduct the previous fall permitted boats from the east to cross the river that spring and to dock in Child's basin in the very heart of town. This gave a great boon to local millers and other shippers who for the first time could send their products at cheap water rates to Albany, New York, and Europe.

These developments completely transformed Rochester's situation. Prior to 1820 it had been a struggling young village of less than 1,500 inhabitants, located some 30 miles northwest of Canandaigua. Five years later, with over 5,000 residents, it was the largest place west of Albany. Even Utica and Buffalo were surpassed, while Canandaigua, still a quiet village of some 2,000, was now 30 miles southeast of Rochester.

A host of newcomers streamed in from the east. Among them were many Irish and German immigrants who, with a few French Canadians and some 200 African Americans, gave the Genesee canal port a cosmopolitan flavor. With approximately 200 boats arriving at its docks daily in the late twenties, Rochester's imports from the east surged past \$1 million by 1827, when its exports topped that figure by at least a fifth. Many of these boats were products of local boat yards, and the Genesee River was for a time the Erie Canal's most active contributory artery.



Sam Patch

A bustling canal port, Rochester attracted a host of boatmen and other transients, many of whom were eager to slake their thirst at one of the numerous grog shops that bordered



the canal. The village had in fact acquired the character of a “hot spot,” and was widely known as such in 1829 when Sam Patch made his fateful visit.

A popular acrobat whose specialty was falls jumping, Sam Patch had a catchy motto, “Some things can

be done as well as others,” but his luck ran out on Friday, November 13, that year. Some of the thousands who watched his fatal jump at the main falls of the Genesee did not sleep well for several nights.

And when Charles G. Finney, the revivalist, came to Rochester a few weeks later, he found the atmosphere so charged that his religious and temperance exhortations proved most effective and endured long enough to assure victory to the Whigs in 1834. It was at time that Rochester assumed the status and secured the charter of a city.

The Flour City

Local millers, increasing to twenty in number, made Rochester in the early 1830s the leading producer of flour in America. Local millwrights and coopers as well as boat builders thrived, and other accessory shops appeared. Two distilleries, numerous asheries, a rope walk, an iron foundry, a window-sash factory, three tanneries, and a cotton factory were among the 137 “manufactures” listed by the first directory in 1827; only the cotton factory failed. Several busy brickyards turned out 8 million bricks the next year, enabling businessmen to erect more substantial buildings, such as Abelard Reynolds’ four-story Arcade, built at a cost of \$30,000; with a lofty skylight enclosing a spacious interior court that rose to the third story, it quickly became the chief business mart in town.

The erection of a public market had several important consequences. When the village trustees voted to build it out over the river at the northwestern corner of the bridge, they supplied a precedent that stimulated the construction of other buildings over the river. The northern edge of the bridge was soon completely spanned, but a half century would pass before the southern edge was similarly enclosed. Meanwhile the trustees, in order to finance the market’s construction, authorized a sale of bonds. Their action not only plunged



the town into debt but by so doing convinced many citizens that Rochester needed a city charter to permit an orderly development of its functions.

The campaign for a city charter was, unfortunately, soon embroiled in politics. Although, after prolonged agitation, the state legislature drafted a charter that Buffalo and Utica accepted in 1832, Rochester rejected it on the grounds that one clause authorized a state-appointed recorder to attend



and vote on the local council. City leaders finally secured the passage on April 28, 1834 of a modified charter that safeguarded local autonomy. Jonathan Child, son-in-law of Colonel Rochester, was elected as the city's first mayor. With its boundaries extended to encompass 4,819 acres, Rochester's population reached 12,252.

The Flower City



As the new city expanded, community leaders were discovering by the late 1840s that the city's chief asset was no longer the Genesee River, cascading over its falls, nor the Erie Canal, though it bore an increasing load of freight to and from the upper lakes, but the city's entrepreneurs.

A number of immigrants, many with special talents, created their own jobs and established new firms. John Jacob Bausch



and Henry Lomb, James Cunningham, William Gleason, George Taylor, each introduced a fresh line of goods and soon supplied employment to skilled newcomers from their homelands.

Industrious shoemakers, some from England and Germany, enterprising clothing merchants, most of them German Jews, introduced the newly invented sewing machines and other devices to speed production by an increasing number of "hands." Henry

Bartholomay's Brewing Company had a German flavor, but it was the nurseries developed by George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry that provided the greatest fragrance and transformed the Flour City into the Flower City. Rochester developed a new specialty as Ellwanger and Barry and other skilled nurserymen discovered the joint advantages presented by the canal and by Lake Ontario. The latter, serving as a temperature stabilizer, warded off severe freezes, while the former assured local nurserymen a head start, in competition with eastern rivals, on shipments to the west.

The Kodak City

By the end of the nineteenth century, Rochester was flourishing, and new businessmen began to transform the city once again. When Henry O'Reilly, Rochester's

versatile Irishman, failed in his attempt to organize an efficient telegraph system, Hiram W. Sibley founded Western Union and achieved nation-wide sway. George B. Selden, a patent lawyer, first successfully adapted the internal combustion engine to road-vehicular propulsion and secured patent on the automobile. But none succeeded so remarkably as George Eastman, who perfected dry-plate photography, produced a simple camera for amateur use, and invented a flexible film – the three basic ingredients of a new industry that launched Rochester on a fresh era of expansion.



The phenomenal success of the Eastman Kodak Co. first attracted attention during the depression of the 1890s. While many firms collapsed or seriously curtailed their forces, Eastman continued to expand. Several other companies held their own or quickly recovered. Keen observers could not help noting that all the more fortunate manufactured either patented or top-grade products. It soon became evident that Rochester, lacking convenient access to rich coal or mineral resources, could not compete in the heavy-industry field or in that of mass-production. It would have to rely on the ingenuity of its technicians, the skills of its workers, and the enterprise of their managers.



Eastman Theatre and
Eastman School of Music,
Rochester, N. Y.

Eastman's Benevolence

George Eastman's success made him a wealthy man. Without a wife or children to support, Eastman made Rochester the beneficiary of his fortune.

His first large local gift provided for the erection in 1900 of the Eastman building of the Mechanics Institute, which later became the Rochester Institute of Technology. That contribution (\$200,000) rallied wide support for an institution long maintained singlehandedly by Henry Lomb. Eastman's early interest in practical education prompted a smaller gift to the university for a physics laboratory in 1906, and he did not begin to expand his support until 1912 when a \$500,000 gift for general educational purposes at the university marked a turning point. From that date his donations increased in number and volume and brought new vitality to the university, to local hospitals, and to other struggling institutions. His example established a tradition of local giving that brought the Community Chest into being in 1920 and thereby supplied Rochester with one of its most useful institutions, now known as the United Way.

Eastman's interest in science was matched if not surpassed by his devotion to music. Much of his social life was centered in the Sunday musicales held with considerable regularity at his

new mansion opened on East Avenue in 1905. His increasing support of the orchestra and of a struggling music academy culminated in a decision in 1919 to establish a fully endowed School of Music as a part of the University of Rochester and to maintain a Philharmonic Orchestra of professional quality in a sumptuous new theater to be erected on East Main Street. Its dedication in October 1921 marked a high point in the Kodak City era.

World War I and the Great Depression

The First World War diverted Rochester's attention from local self-improvement to national and world causes. Monroe County sent 18,119 combatants and suffered 609 fatal casualties, 512 of them from Rochester. Meanwhile, defense and military orders enabled local firms to demonstrate their ability to live up to city's motto

"Rochester Made Means Quality."

After the war, the city's attention turned once again to civic improvement, but only for a short



period of time. During the 1930s, Rochester, like the rest of the nation, found itself in the midst of a depression that completely overshadowed all predecessors. The reaction at the start was one of confidence. A Civic Committee on Unemployment boldly tackled the crisis. It collected pledges from thousands of individuals to expend \$6,000,000 on private improvements; it also encouraged the city manager to launch several work-relief projects. The unprecedented extent of the local effort plunged the city deeply into debt. The heavy debt burden created a strong demand for economy and shifted Rochester's civic program into low gear.

A population drop in the thirties, the first in Rochester's history, confirmed the mood for retrenchment, which permeated many facets of city life. Even in industry a new emphasis on security appeared. Marion B. Folsom at Kodak became an early advocate of unemployment insurance and devised a plan whereby fourteen Rochester firms pledged to set aside reserves for that purpose. That announcement in 1931 attracted wide interest and soon brought Folsom a call to Washington to help devise a national program



in that field and in social security. The Eastman Co. made its first payments, as pledged, in 1933, but renewed activity there soon eliminated that necessity.

Expanding production at Kodak and at several other plants began to restore the city's economy in the mid-thirties, yet a mounting opposition among business leaders to the New Deal, contrasting with continued popular support, created a local division that checked recovery.

World War II

It was only in 1939 when the outbreak of war in Europe inundated Rochester firms with new defense and war orders that the economy was galvanized to action. Pearl Harbor brought sober responsibilities to some 30,000 men and women who joined the armed services; it also stirred unprecedented home-front responses in war-relief contributions, salvage collections, war-bond savings, and, most important of all, industrial output. The numbers thus



employed, 40 percent of them women, climbed to 121,000 by 1943 when the crescendo on the battlefield was beginning to rise.

Monroe County's fatal casualties reached 1,139 by the close of 1945, a heavy burden of sorrow shared by all elements of the population. Most citizens also shared a sense of pride in the unity of their effort and in the volume and quality of its output.

A Metropolitan City

As industry seized its postwar and then its cold war opportunities with renewed vigor, the city experienced a resurgence of confidence. After successfully paying off most of the debt, the city prepared to launch a widespread rehabilitation program. With state aid and encouragement, the city erected Hanover Houses, a public housing project that soon prompted it to undertake a broader slum-clearance





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program in the adjoining Baden–Ormond area. The city also launched a county-backed plan for a new civic center and an even broader plan, in conjunction with the state, for the building of inner and outer arterial loops and expressway connections with the state Thruway.

Progress in these fields, highlighted by the 1955 opening of the War Memorial, the first of the new Civic Center buildings, focused attention on Rochester's emerging metropolitan stature. Although industrial employment, after recovering from its postwar dip, exceeded 14,000 in a few months, it leveled off at between 108,000 and 110,000 as automation absorbed much of the burden of increased production. Non-industrial employment, on the other hand, continued to rise and at a faster rate than the population.

The latter growth, now almost exclusively in the suburbs, further emphasized the city's metropolitan character. And while most of the new residential, commercial, and industrial construction occurred on the periphery, a resurgence of vitality soon appeared downtown. A vigorous effort to provide metered off-street parking lots and to erect municipal ramp garages contributed greatly to the revival of the business district. The vast Midtown Plaza project, launched by the Forman and McCurdy brothers, sparked serious discussion of other redevelopment schemes that promoters hoped would may finally restore the Genesee River to its proper place in Rochester.

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